

# Karl Mindermann and the Restoration of the California State Capitol: A Legacy Restored

By Marti Dennis

*Editor's Note: In lieu of the regular "Volunteer Spotlight" feature this month, I am including a piece about a former volunteer, **Karl Mindermann**, and his role in the restoration of the California State Capitol. Recently his wife of more than 50 years, **Henrietta**, was kind enough to sit down with me and share information about the restoration effort and Karl's unique role in the project.*



We all have learned that the California legislature first occupied our beautiful state capitol in 1869. By the 1890's the building's decorative work was labeled "perfect." However, time and a "booming population" were hard on the Capitol structure. It was remodeled several different times to accommodate a growing state administrative operation, and it slowly lost much of its original beauty and structural integrity. In the 1970's – a hundred years since its first occupants took up residence – it was determined to be seismically unsafe.



**Karl Mindermann 1981**

**Sacramento Bee**

As a result, in 1975 it was decided to restore the Capitol to its original grandeur, making it both safe in the event of an earthquake and returning it to its Victorian beauty.

Perhaps you did not know that the double-domed structure was a major part of the restoration effort, and **Karl Mindermann**, an employee of Park Mechanical, was the craftsman selected to lead the dome restoration project. Karl and his wife Henrietta subsequently became members of CSCMVA, joining with the Class of 2004.

Karl was born in Bremen, Germany where he learned and perfected the craft of silversmith. Enjoying American novels of the Wild West, Karl soon decided to contact distant relatives in the United States to learn about the potential for his immigration. They agreed to sponsor him, and he arrived in California in 1951. There was minimal interest in silver when he arrived. It had been replaced by stainless steel, and so Karl set out to learn a new craft: sheet metal. He joined Park Mechanical as a Journeyman and specialized in the crafting of stainless steel kitchens in local Sacramento restaurants.

**Karl Mindermann 1981**

**Sacramento Bee** When Park Mechanical was awarded the state contract for the restoration of the Capitol's exterior copper dome, Karl was selected to lead the effort as master craftsman. He was "responsible for mending, smoothing and reattaching 300 copper ribs, along with cutting, contouring and fitting new copper sheets that form the dome." The task was a complex one, so Karl invented a machine to do the tedious and meticulous work. Patterns with variations for each set of 13 panels running from the tip to the bottom of the egg-shaped dome were required. Over a period of six months, Karl's ground level work succeeded in repairing the leaking roof as well as providing the attractive new dome.



Karl and fellow Capitol artisan Michael Casey were each recognized by the American Institute of Architects as "Craftsman of the Year" in 1982 for their exemplary Capitol work. They were honored in Atlantic City, NJ as the **only** national winners in their respective categories. Sen. Edward Kennedy was the keynote speaker at the event. Karl and Michael were also the subject of a January 18, 1982 "Cheers for a Born-Again Capitol" article which appeared in Time magazine.

For all his accomplishments and accolades, Karl remained modest stating, "You drive by [the Capitol] and you look up at it, and you can't help feeling anything but proud." **Karl and Henrietta Mindermann - 2005**

Karl Mindermann, master craftsman, loving husband and father, and CSCMVA volunteer passed away in April 2008. In addition to his proud family, he leaves a beautiful copper dome as his legacy.

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Sources: "Roses for a Restoration," Sacramento Bee, October 23, 1981; "Cheers for a Born-Again Capitol," Time Magazine, January 18, 1982; Der Hermann-Sohn, May 2008; "Volunteer Spotlight," Capitol Clarion, July 2007; California State Capitol Restoration, a Pictorial History, 1988.